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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001383

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: IMMIGRATION, DISIP OFFICIALS STEP-UP HARASSMENT OF
BRV CRITICS AT AIRPORT

REF: A. CARACAS 00599

[1](#)B. CARACAS 01271

[1](#)C. 07 CARACAS 02404

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) is stepping up its harassment of outspoken as well as perceived critics of the regime. In September, four persons reported being pressured by immigration and intelligence police (DISIP) officials at the Caracas airport to surrender their passports for secondary review. One passport, that of Heinz Sonntag, a member of the 2-D civil society movement, was canceled. The BRV has long employed extra-legal methods to harass political opponents and the independent media. In the past, opposition leaders also complained of lengthy delays in renewing travel documents with ONIDEX, the identification and passport office. The BRV is probably attempting to restrict travel to those persons it believes are disseminating negative information abroad about the political situation in Venezuela. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Immigration and DISIP officials annulled the passport of sociologist and civil society leader Heinz Sonntag on September 29 at the Simon Bolivar International Airport. Sonntag was returning from Guatemala when immigration officials told him that "new" regulations required they take copies of his passport. DISIP officials then took the passport away from the immigration booth and placed several "cancel" stamps on it, rendering it unusable. Sonntag, a nationalized Venezuelan of German origin, claims he did not notice the stamps until he left the airport.

[1](#)3. (C) Sonntag is a member of the 2-D/Democracy and Liberty Movement, a loose coalition of intellectuals, students, union leaders, and media owners that was formed to curb President Chavez's efforts to re-introduce controversial measures of his failed constitutional reform package. (Note: 2-D refers to the December 2, 2007 defeat of the reform package. End Note). While the movement claims no political aspirations, it is highly critical of the government's anti-democratic tendencies (Ref. A). On September 11, Minister of Interior and Justice Tarek El-Aissaimi claimed intelligence bodies had detected a plot against Chavez and implicated "business groups, the 2-D Movement, and military officials. (Ref. B)." According to one of his students, Sonntag planned to attend a couple of international conferences this Fall, but will now have to cancel his participation.

14. (SBU) Three journalists also reported being pressured to give up their passports for secondary review in the month of September. The journalists refused and were allowed to proceed, only after arguing with immigration and DISIP personnel. BRV officials have consistently targeted journalists affiliated with critical media outlets for harassment. In a recent incident, Mario Silva, host of a pro-government talk show on state television, accused Globovision owner Alberto Federico Ravell and independent media outlets of plotting a coup to disrupt the November state and local elections (Ref. B).

15. (C) The BRV has previously sought to restrict the ability of political opponents to travel. In December 2007, Monica Fernandez, former judge and director of the judicial NGO Foro Penal, told Poloff that the judge in her now-dismissed case had indefinitely suspended her right to travel, alleging that she was a flight risk (Ref. C). The measure impeded Fernandez, a lecturer on judicial procedures and human rights from earning a living. Separately, for some time now, critics of the government have reported difficulties in renewing passports and national identification documents through ONIDEX.

Comment

16. (C) In recent weeks, President Chavez and BRV officials are spending considerable energy investigating supposed coup and destabilization attempts at the hands of political opponents, including critical media outlets. The BRV has made baseless allegations before previous elections to distract national attention from everyday problems such as inflation and soaring crimes rates. This year, the BRV appears increasingly poised to take more authoritarian

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actions. It has also stepped up harassment of persons affiliated with these groups. In addition, the BRV forcibly expelled the America's Director for Human Rights Watch recently following the release of the NGO's annual report on Venezuela. The BRV will likely increase its attacks on individuals it believes are propagating negative press concerning Chavez's political project in the run-up to the November state and local elections.

CAULFIELD